Blood Lines

September 1, 1998 By Bob Roehr

Hep C's spread

Blood is the most common means for transmitting hepatitis C. With blood products now screened for the virus, dirty needles have become the major source of new infections. A consensus development conference at the National Institutes of Health produced this advice to prevent the spread of the hepatitis C virus:

- Don't share "works" for injecting drugs.
- Make sure needles used for piercing and tattooing have been sterilized.
- Don't share razors, toothbrushes or straws used to snort cocaine.
- Cover open wounds.

There are conflicting data on the risk of sexual transmission, but the CDC found the risk so low that it chose not to recommend universal condom use for people with HCV. The exception is rough sex where bleeding takes place. And there's some evidence that rimming (oral-anal sex) may be risky.

Pregnant women have only a small risk of passing the virus to their newborns, but that climbs into double digits when they are co-infected with HIV. Delivery by Cesarean section lowers this risk of transmission.

Co-infection with HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases in either partner may increase the possibility of HCV transmission.

What about a preventive vaccine? The pharmaceutical company Chiron recently began an early-stage safety trial, but any marketable product is years away.

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